

# *Sketch*

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*Volume 11, Number 2*

1945

*Article 7*

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## The Fall Before

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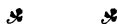
## **Abstract**

Martha snapped the radio off, yawned and closed her economics book...

*Epilogue*

Up along the snow capped crags of *Sierra Madre*  
Feathered between the last of the Rocky chains,  
Lies an old boulder, wind smoothed . . . never touched by  
the sea.

Each year young eagles spatter its sides with ugliness,  
And always it accepts from the wandering wind  
Its share of the earth's dust . . . a mountain goat  
Scrambles across its face in spring.  
After it is gone the face is not the same . . .  
But always the rains from the Pacific come,  
In the heat of night the water soaks into the lime,  
The face is new, washed clean,  
Like the myriad shapes of snowflakes,  
Each new face is there, smoothed by the rain . . .  
Like cloud-washed stars.



## The Fall Before

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MARTHA snapped the radio off, yawned and closed her economics book. It was twenty minutes past midnight.

"Clear," she observed, pressing her nose against the cold window pane. Wrapping the blue housecoat around her feet, she curled up in her father's old Morris chair and unfolded the paper.

"Haskins named ball chairman," announced a headline halfway down the page. "Geneva Haskins, art major, was chosen chairman of this year's Home Economics Ball at a meeting of the Home Economics Club Council last night. The dance will be held Nov. 7 in—."

Martha tossed the paper to the desk.

"Remember last year's ball?" she asked, leaning against the cushioned back and closing her eyes. "Do I remember!" she murmured. "I don't suppose I'll ever forget that ball or that autumn."

She sighed and kicked a slipper off. It fell to the carpet softly.

"Yes, the Hec Ball a year ago," she remarked, yanking her hair-net tighter. "Lots of things have happened since then. Remember the letter you got on your birthday? Remember the day he left? And remember the first night you met him?" She sighed . . .

That night the telephone had begun ringing as soon as she stepped in the door.

"But, Jean," she protested. "I can't go to an exchange tonight. I've been working all day—nine and a half hours and I'm just dead."

Jean's voice over the phone insisted, "You have to, Mart. All these new army fellows from the ASTP are coming, and we don't have girls enough. If things go O.K., you can duck out later."

Martha almost flung the receiver on the hook. "Look at me, Mom!" She stood before the mirror on the stair door. "A frowsy-haired hag with blue bags under her eyes, all six feet of me—and exactly three-quarters of an hour to dress, eat dinner, and get to the college."

She leaped the steps two at a time, kicked off her loafers, and stumbled into the bathroom, jerking on the hot water faucet in the tub.

An hour later she stood at the dark edge of the Shelter and watched uniforms and gay dresses drawing many-pencilled sketches on the smooth floor. "All buck privates and not a one over five foot seven. Ye gods! What a place for Bunyan Bauman to be!"

"Quit griping, Bunyan; be glad you aren't quite six feet," she told herself, turning her back to the dancers and peering through steamy glass at the chill lake waters where the red, gold and blue of neon lights shivered.

"I'm so tired of being a stupidly tall wallflower, of trying to be charming with flattery and fibs when the only charm I may have is my frankness and this innocent trust in people," she thought derisively, her tired muscles relaxing against the cold wall.

A shadow, darker than the others, cut off her shifting alley of light from the juke box.

"Martha, this is Don Manning. Don, Martha Bauman." Martha saw Anne Harrison's unwilling smile and looked at the soldier who stood before her.

"Hello, Don," she spoke civilly but without warmth.

"Would you care to dance?" He hesitated, then guided her to the floor.

"Holy smoke!" Martha commented under her breath. "Is this

a man? Can it be there is a person on this earth to whose mere shoulder my elevated chin only reaches?"

She tipped back her head to study him. Dark brown hair, curly from the roots to the ends, high cheek bones and forehead, long straight nose and chin. "Stubborn and block-headed," she nodded to herself.

"Where's your home, soldier?"

"Out in the sticks," he answered. It was a boyish voice, yet mature and strong. "In Montana."

"Oh, gee!" Martha bubbled. "Out west. I love it out there. I've never been to Montana, but Colorado and Wyoming—."

They had danced around the floor two or three times when Don asked her if she had a girl friend who would like to go out with his buddy.

"Dick doesn't know how to dance," he explained hastily. "And I thought if you wanted to, and you had a girl friend, the four of us could go to the movie."

A double feature. Then a bus ride downtown. Don and Martha entered the door of the USO.

Alive with soldiers and sailors and stenographer-hostesses, the small floor was crammed.

"Let's dance a little while," Don said, after watching the crowd a few minutes.

"In that mess?" Martha frowned in amusement.

"Yup. In that mess. I like to dance with you better than any girl I've ever danced with. We get along fine. Don't you think so?" His steady brown eyes told her he was not teasing.

She nodded, laughing, and put her hand on the khaki shoulder strap of his blouse.

"Have you ever heard such corny music, though, Don?" He bent his head close until his cheek touched her forehead.

"It is pretty corny, isn't it?" His face was cool against hers.

Walking home in the scattered fallen leaves, they raced to see which one could make the most noise. And they talked—of families, homes and school.

"I wish I could be a civilian going to college here," Don confessed slowly. "This is a break for me, as it is. I might never have gone, although I've been saving money for a year."

When they reached the house, both were silent. They stood in front of the porch, watching two dead brown leaves fall apathetically to the cement beneath the street lamp.

"Martha, can I see you again?"

It was late and everyone in the city seemed to be sleeping. Only the sound of the silly bell clanging at the railway cross-gates and the low, echoing whistle of a fast freight approaching the stretch disturbed the cool air.

"Why, yes."

"Are you—are you going to be busy tomorrow?" His voice was eager, though he tried to keep it matter-of-fact.

"I have to write a book review. After that, I'm not busy."

She sensed rather than felt the cling of his khaki blouse to her wool coat. His cheek rested lightly against hers and then he kissed her.

"Good-night, then, Martha. I'll see you tomorrow . . . ."

She remembered the day that had followed and the tense days during which she looked forward to Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons, feeling Don's fingers close over hers in the movies and his smile in the friendly darkness. She remembered with a pang of loneliness their silly chatter and teasing, the soft, quick kisses when they said good-night. She remembered the night of the Hec Ball. . . .

That night she had been sitting for ten minutes on the couch in the living room. She knew it was ten minutes because her dad was listening to a mid-evening news broadcast which featured time and station announcements.

"Anything I can help you with, Marty?" Mrs. Bauman stepped into the dining room to turn the radio down. "You don't have to have it so loud, Bill."

"Huh-uh," Mr. Bauman answered, turning to the editorial page of the evening newspaper.

"Nothing. I'm ready and waiting." Martha touched the cool black smoothness of her skirt, wondering how her voice could be steady when everything inside her was shaking.

A car stopped and a door slammed. Martha peeped through the rows of plants and glass shelves in the front window. Quietly she crossed the room.

"Come in, Don," she smiled, holding the door open.

He stood there for a minute, his deep-set brown eyes shining with cold November wind.

"Gosh, you're beautiful," he whispered in her ear.

They stood for a second on the dark porch; the first harsh cold of winter had already begun entrenchment operations on the cement.

"Darling." His face bent close to hers and his hand tightened about the small, white-gloved one he held. "I knew you'd be beautiful, but I didn't expect as much as I got. You nearly knocked my props away."

The bold wind stole Martha's pleased laugh and cached it in the top branches of the catalpa tree.

"Would you folks mind sitting in front?" the taxi driver asked. "I have another call to pick up."

Rolling around the corners with tires crying bitterly, Don held her close to him, keeping the soft velvet from the driver's rough wool mackinaw. . . .

She remembered one night when they were sitting in the living room after seeing some one of the grade B movies. Purposely, she sat on one end of the couch and thumbed through a new magazine.

"Don, how come Anne Harrison introduced you to me the night of the exchange? She's been glaring at me ever since and I don't know why."

He stretched long legs in front of him and leaned back. "Because I asked her to. You know something?" He sat up straight and leaned toward her.

"Not much," she smiled at the magazine. He caught her hands and threw the magazine to the floor.

"When I looked over and saw you standing there I said to Dick, 'I'm going to have a date with that girl if it's the last thing I do.'"

"It wasn't hard, was it?" Martha asked, ruefully. "First time you met me. I should have held out on you."

He laughed and lifted her into his arms. Gently, he pushed her face against the collar of his blouse. "Marty," he whispered. "If you had, I might have gone nuts with waiting." He kissed her lips, her forehead, her nose. . . .

Martha arose from the chair and stretched. "Stupe," she told the mirror. "A fresh-faced boy-man with brawn and loneliness to match your own makes love to you and leads you on. Things click and unclick and click and unclick. And now he's someplace God-knows-where and you'll never know if he's alive or dead."

She pushed the light button and groped her way past the piano to the stairs. Pausing at the door, she looked at the snow blanket on the lawn.

"But please, God, though I'll never know what happens to him, take care of him."

She opened the door and went up to bed.